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SUBJECT: TOLO USES PROGRAMMING TO PUSH FOR SOCIAL CHANGE;
CONSERVATIVES AND POLITICIANS REACT

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Afghan conservatives and politicians anxious to burnish their Islamic credentials in the run-up to elections have reacted to TOLO television programs which test the limits of traditional Afghan norms. TOLO's recent broadcast of conservatively dressed men and women dancing together during the Afghan version of the Academy Awards drew a strong reaction from powerful Islamic conservatives and their informal demand for a ban on broadcasts of women singing or dancing with men, but no action. TOLO director Saad Mosheni describes his station as a vehicle for social change and claims high viewership. Cultural and political cross currents during the lead up to the presidential and parliamentary elections will raise the stakes and sharpen the rhetoric in this debate. Even moderates, including President Karzai, are looking for a way to affirm their support for press freedoms without offending powerful conservative interests. End Summary.

Conservative Lawmakers Object to TOLO Programming

¶2. (SBU) In the National Assembly March 31, conservative MPs vociferously protested the dancing shown during the Academy Awards telecast and railed against the continued broadcast of Indian soap operas. During the debate, lower house member and former warlord Ustad Abdurab Rasoul Sayyaf interpreted articles one, two, and three of the constitution as calling for the active defense of Islam. He said, "Our constitution bans anything that contradicts Islam and we have all sworn on the Quran that we will protect Islam. What is forbidden is forbidden." (Articles one, two, and three state: 1) Afghanistan shall be an Islamic Republic, independent, unitary and indivisible state; 2) The sacred religion of Islam is the religion of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan...; and 3) No law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy religion of Islam in Afghanistan.) Not all MPs agreed. When Sayyaf called for a ban on foreign women dancers on television, reformer Shukria Barakzai challenged him to show the same concern for the young male dancers who are frequently used as entertainment at all-male parties. The heated discussion ended with conservatives demanding a ban on broadcasts of women singers or women dancing with men, but no binding action.

Religion and Rights in the Context of an Election Campaign

13. (SBU) Conservative members of the National Assembly and elements of the Karzai government, notably the Ministry of Information and Culture, consistently raise Islamic norms and Sharia law when evaluating bills before the legislature. In recent memory, members objected to a bill on highway tolls because it included non-compliance fines, the moribund media law bill because it might protect 'anti-Islamic' programming, and the passport law bill because it allowed women to obtain their own passports without explicit permission from male relatives. Religiously based analysis of legislation will likely increase and become more emotional with the approach of elections as conservative politicians compete to burnish their religious credentials. Few MPs are prepared to be accused of being soft on the issue of religion.

14. (SBU) Even President Karzai carefully walked the line between support for press freedom and respect for Islam as he responded to questions taken during a post-Bucharest press conference on April 6. He made a clear statement in favor of freedom of expression when he said, "As long as I am president here, there will never be any interference in media freedom," but he also admonished television stations to carefully consider their content. "In cases where the broadcasts of Afghanistan's television channels are against the daily life of our people and against what the people accept in their daily life from the cultural point of view, they should not be aired. I request the television channels to stop such broadcasts." Karzai also returned to a familiar, populist theme, warning against outside interference. "I see that Afghanistan's television is deeply

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influenced by foreign broadcasts. This is not in favor of Afghanistan."

Fair Claims of Inconsistent Enforcement

15. (SBU) TOLO views itself as a vehicle for social change in Afghanistan and deliberately challenges traditional norms. Its broadcast of Afghan Star (modeled after American Idol but featuring Afghan songs and music), including a female singer from Kandahar among the three finalists, drew criticism from the conservatives, but had a huge following among Afghans from all age groups and regions. The station has also been criticized for broadcasting romantic Indian soap operas (popular to the point of a national obsession) and concerts (including a pixelated Shakira concert aired during the last week of Ramadan in late 2007).

16. (SBU) TOLO willingness to push the envelope sets it up for criticism, but its complaints about Ministry of Information and Culture's inconsistent enforcement of religious standards may have merit. In fact, Indian movies are a longtime Afghan television staple, aired by all major Afghan television stations, including the state outlet, Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA). Further, TOLO's The Afghan Academy Awards dance number which drew conservative parliamentarians' ire was lifted wholesale (same dancers, same moves, same music) from a locally-produced movie already approved by the Ministry and due shortly for local release.

Sending a Message while Staying out of the Election Fray

17. (SBU) We will continue to remind the government and MPs of the importance we attach to international standards relating to freedom of speech and freedom of the press, but we also note that the election campaign is reflected in a highly charged environment where provocation and double standards often define the terms of the debate. Each side appears ready to stake out extreme positions in favor of one absolute - freedom of speech or Islamic values - leaving little room for compromise or voices of reason. Taking a public stance insisting on TOLO's right to broadcast particular program

would put us in the middle of the debate and likely prove to be counterproductive. We will continue to underline to parliamentary leadership, the ministry, and other officials our commitment to international standards relating to media and speech freedoms and our expectation that the Afghan government ensure the protections included in its constitution are upheld.

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